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AUTHOR Horan, Michael
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ABSTRACT

Research shows that the benefit structure of the GI Bill has discouraged veterans from using the education entitlement. Over 1,000 Florida Vietnam veterans completed a survey on education and the GI Bill. The collective experience provides insight to post-wartime readjustment efforts. Case studies and stories of Vietnam War veterans' educational experiences relating to the GI Bill point out gaps in the program. Problems arise with: prisoners trying to improve literacy skills; minority veterans having to choose between family and education; veterans starting a second career but no longer eligible for their GI Bill benefits; veterans not knowing that GI Bill benefits expired 10 years after service; those wanting to fill out surveys for and recount experiences of deceased veterans, and veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), who were not able to use benefits. Although there are many successes with the GI Bill, the majority of Florida Vietnam veterans had problems using it. If the GI Bill were still available, how many dreams could be realized and how many lives would be improved? (NLA)

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TOUCHING THE HEARTS AND SOULS OF THE VIETNAM WARRIOR

BY

MICHAEL HORAN, ED.D.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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A recent survey of over 1,000 Vietnam theater veterans in the state of Florida revealed just how devastating the effects were of the poorly funded and recently expired Vietnam Era GI Bill. For the first time research has shown how the benefit structure of this federal education program actually discouraged veterans from using this entitlement. It also showed how it was necessary to seek other financial resources, and how PTSD, race, and employment were linked with considerable underachievement in college, especially for minority "nam vets." Distressing as these results are, they pale next to the vivid recollections of college told to me and my wife Marti during the months it took to complete the surveying phase of this project.

During the last four months of 1990, Vietnam theater veterans in Florida not only wholeheartedly supported this research effort by completing the survey, but took the time to let me know the importance of education and how the GI Bill either helped or hindered them. This collective experience helped us develop a newer and deeper understanding about their post wartime readjustment efforts, and also influenced how the results would be presented to the general public and veterans groups. The facts, figures, percentages and charts tell one side of the story, but the most revealing side of this survey business came straight from the hearts and souls of these men and women. This is the emotional and human side that most people like to hear - it is the story behind the story!

A frequent theme I heard expressed the hopes and dreams of a better life after returning home from South Vietnam. One female in St. Marks asked me if she could fill out the survey for her husband and I had to say no. She understood and began to recount how she waited for her husband to come back home; he was going to return to college, get a degree and start a business. They were so much in love and wanted to start a family....it all sounded so nice and positive. I keyed in on her dreams and asked her "How did things go for you when he got home? Never quite looking at us squarely, but dazing off to the side, she merely said "he did two tours...went over twice...came back once! I got the distinct feeling she though he still might be coming home, or at least she wanted to believe that. She never could say he was killed in Vietnam...maybe in her mind he really was alive.

A visit inside two Florida correctional facilities taught me how valued companionship, outside contact, and knowledge were to incarcerated veterans. Education took on a new meaning to these men who had formed their own VVA chapter behind prison walls. With little else constructive to do with their time, most desired to

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improve their basic literacy skills. Education and prison seemed to me to be a natural pairing and I could sense the anticipation and excitement as I discussed the GI Bill. More than one mentioned that "a college education was the ultimate benefit" and "if I could do it all over again I'd go back to school and start over." Since practically all of these men had a high school education, college training was the focus of their dreams. Sadly, the GI Bill was not permitted to be the manner
by which these men could attain self-improvement.

I learned that veterans of any war or conflict could not use their GI Bill while in prison. It seems that in the late 1970's corrections officials in Florida made the decision to forego efforts that would qualify the prison as a certified correspondence center. Further, local colleges and high schools were not permitted to come inside the prison to teach classes to interested inmates; security was the reason given. It seems that education was denied that could have been paid for by the GI Bill. As one incarcerated vet doing fifteen to twenty years told me, "time spent away cleaning this shithole was frowned upon...afterall, we're here to be punished...education is not punishment." So much for helping these men improve themselves and so much for their dreams!

Minority veterans, especially blacks were hardest hit with disappointment and despair when they tried to use the GI Bill. During a visit to Quincy in Florida's Panhandle, I had an opportunity to survey some of these men in the backstreet bars and "mom and pop" stores where they frequently gathered. More than one "nam vet" explained that not only was it difficult to get into college, but finding decent work to help support a family was even more difficult. Black vets who had to choose between school and family almost always choose family. One vet reminded me, "ya can't have both - maybe my kids can go to college if I work and make enough money for them."

Surveying minority Vietnam veterans was a constant reminder of how veteran service organizations, and specifically VVA, was perceived by this group. When I tried to explain to one black vet what VVA was doing locally and nationally he merely replied cynically, "Oh yea, them are clubs for you white folks...what would I do?...make everybody feel a little less guilty? Episodes like that one, and some others as well, were a reminder of how much more effort all of us need to put into recruiting minority veterans into our chapters. Their problems and dreams could be our collective problems and dreams, just as they were years ago in a distant land when we were all brothers sharing an uncommon experience.

Many, many Vietnam veterans considered themselves late developers. A Tallahassee man returned from "nam" and worked with his dad in the RV business. It was a good living for him and his family until the bottom fell out in the early 1980's and they had to file bankruptcy. This man had little formal education, and never though that he would need college training. He managed to obtain a job as an aide in elementary education working with handicapped children.

He liked this work and began to realize that he needed more education to advance in the system. By this time however, his ten year period of eligibility for the GI Bill had long since passed. He had no savings, couldn't qualify for a loan or other education assistance and was stuck in a low status and low paying job. Now in his early 40's, this Vietnam vet was ready for college, but college wasn't ready for him. His despair reflected a typical response from many veterans, "Why can't I use the GI Bill now? "Why isn't the GI Bill good for a lifetime? "the painful memories of combat, death, and destruction last a lifetime, why not the educational benefits I earned?"

A "Black ex-Marine working as an automobile salesman echoed the same sentiments. "When the GI Bill was ready for me - I wasn't ready for it and when I finally got it together, the GI Bill wasn't there for me." He and I talked several times about the rejection he faced in Oakland, California by whites and blacks alike after he completed his tour of duty in 1971. Full of energy, and a healthy dose of innocence, he enrolled at the local college only to face hostile stares, glances, and comments. It seems he made the mistake of wearing his old "field jacket" on campus and immediately became labeled by campus blacks as "that Uncle Tom who done the white man's dirty work." He recalls with some anger that "even the Black Panthers didn't want nothing to
do with me."

"Eventually I quit college, tried to get a job and couldn't...tried to go back into the military and couldn't...started doing and dealing drugs...got busted and did some jail time. Eventually I got out and started it all over again. He eventually got into a drug rehab Program, was diagnosed with PTSD, and began to deal with some long buried wartime feelings. As part of his recovery process of starting over, he decided to try college once again. But by now it was 1983 and his GI Bill was no longer available. He was finally back on his feet and ready for a better life through education...but it was not in the cards for this Vietnam vet. This Vietnam vet spend his ten year entitlement period fighting drugs and PTSD when he could have been in school.

Perhaps the most emotional, educational, and mentally draining experience during the surveying process was the weekend we spent at Lake City when the "Moving Wall" was on display at the VA hospital. Marti and I were prohibited from surveying on Va grounds, so we moved across the street and set up in the corner of the Winn-Dixie parking lot. We became inspired to "beat the system" and to make this weekend work. She got posterboard, made signs, and attached them to several grocery carts, and began asking if people were Vietnam vets. We didn't want to intrude into the emotional experience of those who came to visit the "Moving Wall,' so we were careful not to press too hard. Ironically, only two persons refused to fill out our survey, and both worked for the VA.

We were centrally located and attracted lots of attention from the small but steady stream of visitors. For the next two days we

assumed various roles of educator, researcher, counselor, military expert, confidant, and friend to all those that stopped by to talk. Our presence didn't seem to bother anybody, and in fact, we were encouraged to continue by many persons.

I talked with a three war vet who never got to use any GI Bill after he retired. It never dawned on him that he could ever lose his benefits. Now in his early sixties, this Vietnam vet wanted to go back to college and get a degree. His only comment reflected a somewhat cynical view: "Uncle Sam sure saved a lot of money on me!"

One distraught veteran spent over two hours with us talking and crying over his buddies whose names were on the wall. His grief caused him a great dilemma and he couldn't decide if he should fill out the survey or not, and what it would mean if he did or didn't. Marti talked with him from time to time and he got a few things off his chest...mainly we just let him sit and ponder. Eventually he did complete the survey, thanked us for being with him, and left saying "I think I feel a lot better now."

During this weekend we had to turn down many persons who wanted to fill out the survey for a deceased veteran, or who were not an "in country" veteran. Many times I had to explain to a WW II or Korean vet that I was not studying veterans of that war. This was sometimes a touchy matter - some seemed offended, became defensive and though that I should be studying their generation of warriors. Vietnam Era vets were sometimes the most vocal about being excluded from the survey. We met and talked with many "Era" vets and came to know how similar their experiences stateside were with those who served in "nam."

Vietnam Era vets used the same poorly funded GI Bill, faced the same rejection by society, and were often labeled negatively as were "in country" veterans. I came face to face with many Era vets who taught me that it was "no piece of cake for Era vets during the aftermath of the war." Their experiences with the GI Bill sounded almost identical to the ones I was hearing from "theater vets."

One "Era" vet came to my rescue during a sidewalk debate about the value of the survey. Several "nam vets" just couldn't quite understand how surveying about the GI Bill was anything important. I just couldn't say the right words or express the right sentiment to convince them to complete the survey. About the time I was ready to give up, this "Era" vet stepped our from the small crowd that had gathered and took charge. "Hey you hotshots, any of you ever had PTSD? he asked authoritatively. "No" they responded. "Pretty lucky weren't you? he asked. "Yep" they responded. "But you do know about PTSD with other vets, right? "We sure do" was their answer. The "Era" Vet followed up with the same questions about Agent Orange, and the POW/MIA issues. "Well just maybe some other guys couldn't use the Gi Bill because of these and other reasons you may not know about...and just maybe this could help us understand things better. "You wouldn't be opposed to helping other vets would you? One of the "nam vets" giving me a hard time

glanced at me and replied, "Shit man, why didn't you say this earlier"

In a very short order everybody was filling out a survey and thinking it was a good idea. This was a vivid reminder to me that important issues to all Vietnam veterans have usually started small, from just the kind of research I was doing: PTSD in the seventies; Agent Orange in the eighties; and now the POW/MIA matter in the nineties. My "Era friend left me with the
hope that education issues would not take so long to resolve.

In Fort Lauderdale, I attended a large reunion of Vietnam veterans and talked with an ex-marine whose tragic story I will never forget. This highly decorated career officer returned from his second tour in Vietnam and was assigned with an I&I unit located in the northeast. His primary duty was to make "casualty calls" to tell parents and wives that their son had been killed or wounded in Vietnam. Though specially trained for this assignment, it was terrible duty and filled with many bad memories. He decided to spend his off hours wisely and constructively by enrolling in a political science course at a local university. These plans started him thinking about getting a Masters degree.

The professor teaching the course was a nice enough person, even though he frequently expressed his opposition to "the war" in the classroom. The professor had a son in Vietnam and he expressed how proud he was of him and how life would be good for him when he returned home. In fact, this student Marine and the professor had some things in common and talked frequently before and after class about the war in Vietnam, the military, and the complexities of the times.
Their friendship came to an abrupt halt shortly thereafter when the dreams of a proud father were shattered a highly decorated Marine who made a "casualty call" to his home. His young student was now an "official of the government" and had to deliver the tragic news about yet another lost life - which he did with consummate professionalism.

Once his official duty was completed, the young Marine continued with the course, business as usual so he thought. He was doing pretty well grade wise...so it seemed! At the end of the semester, the Marine was astonished to discover that he received an "F" grade for the course. Believing that this was a mistake he turned to the professor only to discover that "F" was the correct grade. When he asked for an explanation the professor told him very coldly and matter of factly, "Somebody has to pay for my sons death - and it just might as well be you - and you can't do a damn thing about it!"

The highly decorated Marine quit the Corps several weeks later and never returned to college again, and has never set foot on any college campus. Over twenty years later, he frequently recalls that experience with the college professor who ripped apart his heart and soul. He still bleeds inside...and he can't do a damn

things about it!

These are just a few of the many stories where Vietnam veterans exposed their heart and soul to Marti and I during the survey of the GI Bill. These few stories reflect the other side - the human side, of this research project. Education was and is still very important to these men and women. Many are still recovering from their service in South Vietnam; most have managed to put it behind them and get on with their lives. Many view themselves as "late developers" who finally have gotten "back on track" with their lives. There are many successes with the GI Bill to be sure, but for the majority of Florida Vietnam veterans, there were many problems using it. Society, higher education, PTSD, and low benefits, tended to dampen the educational aspirations of many men and women.

For a generation of American warriors who served their country in Southeast Asia, a college education is still a dream that is cherished. One can only wonder that if the GI Bill were still available, how many dreams could be realized and how many lives would be improved. Sadly, we may never know. The dreams of a better life still persist, as do the haunting memories of duty in a distant land.

Many veterans want a THIRD CHANCE at education. One by product of the "GI Bill Study" could be the establishment of a "Re-entry Education Program for these men and women. However, this is something I am working on at the state level. So stay tuned to these pages and you just might begin hearing about a "THIRD CHANCE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM FOR VIETNAM VETERANS."